

Epps Christian Center celebrates its 8th year of service

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Sylvia Tisdale prepares a plate Saturday at a volunteers appreciation breakfast for Epps Christian Center on Pace Boulevard. The center is celebrating eight years of service to the community, including five years of providing free meals to the needy. / Richard McVay/rmcvay@pnj.com

In a small kitchen on Pace Boulevard on Saturday, Sylvia Tisdale did what she does every morning. She cooked breakfast. But on this day, Tisdale, pastor of Epps Christian Center, wasn't serving her usual clientele of Pensacola's poor and homeless. She was thanking a handful of supporters, people who through their time and donations have helped Tisdale's ministry continue to offer help to the less fortunate for eight years. For five of those years, Tisdale has offered free meals five days a week to anyone who comes through her door. "I know that if some of these folks didn't eat here, they wouldn't have a meal that day," Tisdale said.

Epps may be a small mission, but it's one with a big heart. From the cozy kitchen, Tisdale and volunteers serve up big meals — more than 1,000 every month. She's a regular at area food banks, where she gets thousands of pounds of food to make those meals. Tisdale's big smile shows her pride in her work, and her earnestness shows her need for help. "If I had more, I could do more," she said. She said the mission suffers because of its size. Larger charities and services always seem to get the grants, and she can't afford to seek donations through the mail. "One hundred stamps cost \$44," she said.

"For \$44, I could make a big pot of grits." The center has about five regular volunteers and 25 donors who help serve a ministry Tisdale formed with her mother in mind. "I was one of 12 kids," she said. "My mother always fed the whole community. I always wanted to do something in her memory." Issac Papillion has been volunteering at the center for two months because of a promise

he made to his dying wife. He knew of Tisdale's ministry, but he said he didn't realize the joy he could have from helping out until he discovered his wife had been buying food for people in their neighborhood for years. The visits from those people in her final days prompted Papillion's wife to make him promise to continue her efforts. Papillion said the work Tisdale does is "amazing." "We're seeing more and more young people coming through here," he said. "Some may even have jobs, but those jobs aren't doing enough for them." Tisdale said volunteers don't have to be great cooks, either. "All you have to do is give your time," she said. "Just even to talk to people and smile. A smile can give people hope."